YOU ONLY HAVE WHAT YOU GIVE
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Psalm 78:1–4, 13–16
Philippians 2:1–13
Exodus 17:1–7

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who . . . emptied himself."
Philippians 2:5, 7 (NRSV)

My faith is based on the sense of being sustained.
I have no proof that my faith in God is not a product of ignorance,
superstition, wild hope, or wishful thinking,
but I have felt loved by a concerned and caring holy being
greater than my imagination. And I have had my experience
confirmed by thousands who have gone on before me,
jotting a record of their encounters on rolls of papyrus,
or locating the site of their theophanies
by piling stones in the desert.
And if my faith in God has more base
in emotion and intuition than in logic,
I'm frankly untroubled —for as Pascal noted,
"It is the heart that perceives God and not the reason."

Ron Hansen in
Image: Art, Faith, Mystery

Startle us, O God, with your abundant creativity and your abundant grace.
Startle us, once again, with news of your unconditional love,
and startle us with the truth that in giving ourselves to you
—to the people you love—we become wealthy and alive,
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

One of the purposes of a vacation is to put enough distance between oneself and one's daily work routine that you see it a little more clearly and miss it more dearly. A good vacation is one in which you are eager to return to work before the vacation is over. All of that happened for me in August. But when I returned this time, I encountered surgery, which had been suddenly moved up on the calendar from late in the fall. I was literally at my desk planning September sermons when the phone call came: there was an

opening in the schedule. Instead of later in the fall, I could have the surgery now, forty-eight hours away. So I took it. The result of adding four weeks of recuperation to vacation was a near-extended sabbatical, during which I feared I might forget how to do this and, even more threatening, you might forget who your pastor was. All of which is to say how very relieved and glad I am to be here this morning.

There are things to learn and blessings to be counted during a period of recuperation, foremost among them the patient kindness and love of spouse and family; the kindness of generous and thoughtful friends; flowers, get-well cards, sensational chicken soup, and out-of-this-world chocolate-chip cookies, back-to-school sugar cookies, and Chicago Cubs cupcakes. It almost makes surgery worthwhile. In fact, it is so nice I'm considering surgery every fall. I do thank you for your well wishes and prayers. It is an extraordinary experience to know that you are being prayed for. And one thing more: not a day goes by that I am not profoundly grateful to be alive in the year-of-our-Lord 2008, with modern health care, a wonderful new world-class hospital in the neighborhood, and sophisticated surgical techniques accessible, at least to some of us. I am acutely aware in this election year that not everyone is so blessed in the world. Forty or so million people in our own nation do not have adequate health insurance and therefore access to the system. A day doesn't go by that I am not acutely aware that it wasn't so very long ago that there was no remedy for joint disease other than pain killers and a life of decreasing activity. I think daily of my grandparents who simply had to endure the pain that is now so amazingly addressed by joint replacement surgery.

I am grateful for all of it—for my colleagues on the staff who have stepped up magnificently to maintain the life and ministry of Fourth Presbyterian Church; in Dana's illness and my absence, for the management team of Ali Trowbridge, Rob Holben, and Don Allerton, convened by Calum MacLeod. I'm so grateful for the kindness, prayers, the cookies—of course—and the reminder of how very good it is to be part of this community of faith.

We are launching today the Annual Appeal for Fourth Presbyterian Church and Chicago Lights, our mission outreach organization. Like most churches, we ask our members and friends to support the work of the church in an annual Stewardship campaign. But if you have been around here the last few years and have listened carefully, you know that we struggle with a quandary, a mystery. The majority of our members don't give anything to support this church: no pledges, no gifts. It's been true for years, and for the past few we've been saying it out loud. Thirty percent of our members make a pledge, seventy percent don't. Forty percent give something; sixty percent don't. There are something like fifty congregations in the Presbytery of Chicago that do better than that. At Second Presbyterian in Indianapolis, a congregation much like ours, sixty percent of the members

give. Indianapolis Colts quarterback Peyton Manning is a member of that church. Maybe that's the difference—so perhaps the Evangelism Committee needs to recruit Kyle Orton. At Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, fifty percent give. We conclude that part of the reason for the quandary is that we look like a wealthy church or at least a wealthy congregation where a few very capable and generous members carry the load. We do have generous members, but the truth is we need everyone's gift—large or small.

Last year we decided to try to resolve the mystery. We did a giving assessment, conducted interviews and focus groups, and members told us two things.

1. *Stewardship language isn't always effective, particularly for people who do not have a long history in church.*

Now, I have difficulty with that. Stewardship—that all of life is a gift, the world is a gift, my life, my skills, and abilities, such as they are, my talents, my possessions, my income, all of it a gift given to me to manage, to be responsible for—all of that is close to what it means to be a believing, practicing Christian, in my mind. But if it doesn't communicate, it doesn't communicate. "Tell it straight," you said in interviews and focus groups. "Tell us what you need and what we need to give." So we took a deep breath and called it a non-theological name—an Annual Appeal—and explained that we need $6.3 million in pledges and gifts and we'll only get them if our nongiving members start to give and if our loyal giving members increase their gifts. You can't say it any straighter than that.

2. *The second thing you told us is that we ask for money too many times during the year.*

And so we are combining two efforts—the Fall Stewardship Campaign and the Spring Campaign for Chicago Lights—into one Annual Appeal. Because you told us you preferred it this way, we're asking you to think about your annual support as one pledge, one gift. There will be occasional appeals—for special events and special needs—but we're going to try one Annual Appeal, starting this Sunday.

In the meantime, I can't imagine a more challenging time to launch a fund-raising appeal. We've been holding our breath for two weeks as stalwart icons of Wall Street tottered, collapsed, and disappeared before our eyes. It's hard to believe: Merrill Lynch, Lehman Brothers, Washington Mutual—gone. And as the stock market plunged, rose, plunged again, we worried about retirement plans and savings accounts. We're watching carefully as federal officials and politicians try to stabilize the economy, and many of us,

I suspect for the first time in our lives, have found ourselves asking, “What if?”

All in all we have been forced to think about what we have, what is really valuable, essential, what we hope for, who we are, and what is really, finally important to us.

A few weeks before the economy forced those questions upon us, the weather did for many Americans. For the second time in three years a hurricane prompted massive evacuations and the instantaneous necessity of deciding what is really important.

Time magazine, after Katrina, during the Southern California fires, and before Ike, published a feature “The Things Not Left Behind.” “Being told you have ten minutes to flee focuses the mind on the treasures you can’t live without,” *Time* said and asked, “What would you take? After photo albums, inhaler, and important papers, then what?”

The article included poignant responses:

- Special kids’ blankets
- Grandfather’s Marine uniform and WWII Purple Heart
- Grandmother’s butter dish
- Autographed baseballs and a PlayStation 2, said one boy

There are, of course, professional FEMA disaster preparedness guidelines. One couple decided to see how helpful and realistic they were, took the FEMA list to Wal-Mart, spent $343 and filled a duffle bag that turned out to be too heavy to lift.

Evacuation, *Time* said, is traumatic—the “willful and reasonable abandonment of a life. . . . Material things become a proxy for other things: peace of mind, a sense of place, personal identity.”

Which brings me to the text. In Ali Trowbridge’s fine sermon last week, we heard about the children of Israel, evacuated from Egypt and in the wilderness. At the end of an unlikely and extraordinary series of events, they have been liberated from their slavery in Egypt. Moses has led them—all of them, the children and grandparents, their livestock, the belongings they can carry on their backs. It was an evacuation. At the last moment the Egyptians change their mind, send the army to recapture them and bring them back to slavery. But at the Red Sea, or Sea of Reeds, a large swamp, another unlikely development: the Israelites escape; the Egyptian army bogs down and gives up the chase.

Now they're free— and not sure where they're headed. It's the Wilderness, the Sinai Desert, and they're hungry. Not long after their liberation, they begin to complain: "Why have you brought us out here to kill us with hunger? We'd rather be back in Egypt where at least there was enough to eat." God provides. God sends manna, bread from heaven, every morning and quails to eat every evening.

This week they're still in the wilderness—and still complaining. This time they're thirsty. There's no water. Again they ask, "Why did you bring us out here to die of thirst?" Again God provides, this time water from a rock.

For centuries they told the stories—of how their ancestors wandered in the wilderness, following Moses on the way to the Promised Land; of how they were hungry and thirsty and how somehow God provided. For centuries, around campfires, in the villages and countryside of Palestine, in their Diaspora throughout Asia Minor, in synagogues, and in their homes at Passover, in filthy ghettos in Central Europe, in Nazi concentration camps—Buchenwald and Auschwitz—they told the stories of how God provided, how God is faithful, how God may be trusted in good times and bad times, in sickness and in health, in life and in death God may be trusted.

The psalm we read together is a poetic retelling of that formative story.

> We will not hide them from the children;
> we will tell them to coming generations
> the glorious deeds of the Lord . . .
> the wonders he has done.
> He divided the sea. . . .
> split rocks and gave them drink.

The children of Israel, 3,500 years ago, were not naive or gullible. Of all people they understood that God does not guarantee physical protection and safety. As they looked back on it from the perspective of history, their survival in the wilderness—the fact that they did not die of hunger and thirst—was nothing short of miraculous. But they were realists. People did get hungry and sick. People did die on the way.

Unlike the God marketed by purveyors of the fabulously popular Success Gospel—a God who promises to make you wealthy, healthy, and happy if you simply think positively, pray hard, "name it and claim it"—the God they were learning to trust did not guarantee their health and safety and welfare. It was something deeper and more important than that even: a God who was with them on bad days as well as good days, a God whose loving presence in the very midst of darkness and suffering and death gave them power and stamina and courage to live on, a God who does not simply

dispense good gifts but a God who gives himself, empties self, pours self out in love. That's a God unlike any other.

The Christian faith rests on that foundation. Centuries after the Exodus, one of the children of Israel, Paul by name, wrote, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who . . . emptied himself. . . . Being found in human form, he humbled himself."

That is the radical uniqueness of our faith: a God, who in Jesus Christ, emptied himself, took the form not of a king, a heavenly CEO, a potentate, but a servant; a God who so loved the world as to give an only son that the world—that you and I—might have life, might know what it is to be alive.

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," Paul wrote.

Isabelle Allende, popular and distinguished novelist, niece of Chilean President Salvador Allende who was assassinated in 1973, was interviewed on an NPR program, *This I Believe.* I read the transcript of the interview last week and thought about our relationship with our material goods, our wealth, what we might decide to take along if we had to evacuate today, and about St. Paul's radical Christian mandate: "Let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus, who . . . emptied himself."

Isabel Allende said:

> I have lived with passion and in a hurry, trying to accomplish too many things. I never had time to think about my beliefs until my twenty-eight-year-old daughter Paula fell ill. She was in a coma for a year, and I took care of her at home until she died in my arms.
>
> There was nothing to do but cry and remember and to reflect on my journey and the principles that hold me together. . . .
>
> Paralyzed and silent and in her bed, my daughter Paula taught me a lesson that is now my mantra: You only have what you give. It's by spending yourself that you become rich.

Paula had given her life away essentially. Gave her life to others, serving, helping, volunteering. When she died she had nothing—but a heart full of love.

Allende continues:

> The pain of losing my child was a cleansing experience. I had to throw overboard all excess baggage and keep only what is essential. Because of

> Paula I don’t cling to anything anymore. Now I like to give more than to receive. I am happier when I love than when I am loved.

She concluded:

> Give, give, give . . . what is the point of having experience, wisdom, or talent if I don’t give it away? What is the point of having wealth if I don’t share it?” (*This I Believe*, pp.13–15)

And so the challenge before us, in these uncertain and perilous days, is to take stock, to decide what to take along, to trust the goodness and faithfulness of God, in the good times and not so good, and to learn, in our time, as Isabel Allende and so many others have learned that we only truly have what we give—those of us who love this church and what it does in the world, those of us who want to follow Jesus, who aspire, literally, to have the same mind in us that was in him, the one who emptied himself.

That is the challenge, and you know, it is also a gracious invitation to discover that we truly own what we give away—our wealth, our love, our lives—and that in letting go, emptying self, you and I become fully alive.

Amen.